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DEVELOPMENT OF WATER RESOURCES IN AFRICA

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1. Introduction

1.1 The years following the United Nations Water Conference at Mar del Plata coincided with a world economic depression, an inflationary spiral which has halved the value of every unit of currency available for water development and a period of financial stringency which has made it impossible for the UN bodies to assist the developing African countries in the way which was envisaged.

1.2 As a result, the recommendations of the Action Plan are seen in retrospect to be too ambitious for the limited financial and human resources available. In almost every respect, progress in implementing the recommendations has been slow. The exceptions being where existing programmes have been able to continue to make progress even when faced with diminishing resources.

1.3 There is an urgent need, therefore, to rationalize the strategy and to re-deploy the available resources in order to abide by the spirit of the Mar del Plata Action Plan. The aim is not only to achieve the maximum with a minimum of resources but also to allow each member State a chance to state what are the priority areas into which the limited resources can be directed.

1.4 Accordingly, the ECA Secretariat wishes to propose certain modifications to the existing recommendations with a view to providing a more effective mechanism for international and regional co-operation in the field of water resources.

1.5 The proposal takes the form of three recommendations which are below and then discussed briefly. All are inter-related since the primary aim is to initiate action on as many of the specific regional recommendations as possible with a minimum of additional resources.

1.6 These recommendations are:

(1) The utilization of MULPOC's as focal points for sub-regional co-ordination of water resources development.

(2) The establishment of sub-regional intergovernmental committees at the professional level.

(3) The strengthening of the ECA Secretariat in its water resources activities to act as the link between national bodies and the sub-regional committees, and between the intergovernmental committees and other United Nations or international bodies.

2. The utilization of MULPOC's as focal points for sub-regional co-ordination of water resources development

2.1 The existence of five operational arms of ECA within the region provides a basic institutional framework which is already being utilised as a means of providing advisory services on water resources and technical assistance in irural water supplies. At the request of West African member States, one of the professional staff of the Secretariat has been seconded to Niamey and is providing technical advice on water problems as well as acting as vital liaison between the member States and the Secretariat. This has demonstrated to the Secretariat that much closer contact can be maintained in this way between the Water Resources Unit and those national professional staff who have the responsibility for planning and management of water affairs.

2.2 The proposal is, therefore, to continue this concept of establishing closer links between the Secretariat and member States by locating a professional officer with specific responsibility for water resources development in each of the other four MULPOC's.

2.3 This officer will be given the following major tasks:

(i) Making contact with national officials responsible for water resources management and for existing Joint River Basin Commissions.

(ii) Acting as liaison between these officers and the ECA Secretariat so that priorities and programmes emphasis can be established for a particular sub-region.

(iii) Reviewing the progress made in the implementation of the Mar del Plata Action Plan within the sub-region.

(iv) Providing advisory services to governments or assisting in the provision of appropriate technical assistance.

(v) Compiling water resources inventories for both surface and sub-surface water with the help of governments and other institutions within the sub-region.

(vi) Acting as the secretary of a sub-regional intergovernmental committee on water.

3. The establishment of a sub-regional intergovernmental committee on water at the professional level

3.1 The proposals set out at the African Regional Meeting on the follow-up and implementation of the Mar del Plata Action Plan (Addis Ababa, 1978) for the establishment of an Intergovernmental Committee on Water for Africa, which were subsequently endorsed by the Conference of Ministers in 1979, are now seen to be unrealistic in the light of the chronic shortage of funds for travel and the lack of clarity in what is meant to be achieved by such a committee.

3.2 The aim of such a committee is to provide an effective mechanism for implementation and co-ordination of water resources development within the African region. The question is "What is the best means of achieving this aim?".

3.3 One basic consideration is that the strategy and framework of water resources development within a particular sub-region can be more appropriately formulated at a professional level where questions of technical feasibility can be decided before ratification at ministerial level. The institutional framework for ratification at ministerial level already exists in the Council of Ministers at the MULPOC level, and, finally, the ECA Conference of Ministers. There is no need, therefore, to duplicate these institutional arrangements. What is lacking is the institutional framework at the technical or professional level.

3.4 Secondly, the ECA Secretariat has been charged with co-ordinating the activities of the United Nations bodies at the regional level and to follow-up the recommendations for Africa in the Action Plan in the field of water resources. This can best be achieved by identifying priorities in sub-regions with common problems (and often with shared water resources), in the first instance at a technical level so that a rational, phased programme of water development activities can be formulated.

3.5 The proposal is, therefore, that sub-regional intergovernmental committees of manageable size be established, using the MULPOC as a focal point and using the ECA water resources professional officer as a secretary to such committees. Where the need arises, regional meetings can be held to discuss certain specific issues common to all sub-regions such as progress with the implementation of the Mar del Plata Action Plan, problems of water resources development strategy or master planning and interchange or dissemination of experience with the implementation programmes, which will be of assistance to all member States.

4. The strengthening of the ECA Secretariat in its water resources activities

4.1 Recommendation 3 (f) of the specific regional recommendations for Africa in the Mar del Plata Action Plan calls for a strengthening of the Secretariat of the Economic Commission for Africa in its water resources activities so as to assist in co-ordinating the activities of the United Nations bodies at regional level and to follow-up the recommendations for Africa in the field of water resources.

4.2 At the present time, the Water Resources Unit consists of three professional staff, one of whom is seconded to the West African MULPOC.

4.3 Bearing in mind the recommendations annexed to General Assembly resolution 32/197 which requires the regional commissions to exercise team leadership and responsibility for co-ordination and co-operation at the regional level, it is quite clear that the present staff complement of the Water Resources Unit is quite inadequate to fulfil its role within the context of the Mar del Plata Action Plan and the International Drinking Water Supply and Sanitation Decade.

4.4 At the same time, the secondment or placing of water resources staff at MULPOCs is seen as a means of providing an effective mechanism for implementation and co-ordination of water resources activities, in promoting regional and international co-operation and in participating in water resources development programmes, as called for in recommendation 3(e) of the specific regional recommendations of the Mar del Plata Action Plan.

4.5 It is proposed for consideration, therefore, that the staff of the secretariat be restored to its former strength and programme of recruitment and placement of professional staff in each of the five MULPOCs. be initiated as soon as possible. In this way, positive action on the Mar del Plata Action Plan can be seen to be taken in readiness for the mid-Decade conference in 1985.

4.6 In view of the prevailing financial limitations, the views of members should be sought as to the best way the above proposals could be implemented and a feasible time-frame, bearing in mind the recommendation of the Ad Hoc Committee (paragraph 26, Resolution 32/197) that adequate budgetary and financial provisions should be made to enable the regional commissions to discharge their responsibilities.

5. Conclusion

5.1 A number of inter-related proposals have been put forward for discussion in the interest of streamlining the existing recommendations and with a view to providing an effective mechanism for international and regional co-operation in the field of water resources.

5.2 Embodied in these proposals is a plan to make the best possible use of existing resources and institutions, to strengthen the water resources activities of the Secretariat of ECA and to accomplish those specific regional recommendations of the Mar del Plata Action Plan which have a bearing on institutional problems in Africa.

5.3 It is recognized that these proposals call for additional resources to be allocated to the Water Resources Unit of the Natural Resources Division within the ECA Secretariat. In order to assist the water resources unit in carrying out its role effectively, and in the spirit of decentralization within the United Nations system, a phased increase in resources is seen as the only way to promote intergovernmental co-operation in integrated water resources development and management.

5.4 It is appropriate that emphasis should be focussed upon water resources activities within the International Drinking Water Supply and Sanitation Decade. It is also appropriate that some mechanism for channelling the views of national officers engaged in water resources activities to appropriate United Nations and other international bodies be established to identify the constraints in achieving the goals of the Mar del Plata Action Plan.

5.5 In order to achieve effective action, these proposals need not only the strongest endorsement of all levels but also a recognition of the need to provide additional financial resources. Although these might be difficult to acquire in the present economic climate, they represent a commitment to the implementation of the Mar del Plata Action Plan as a means of improving the economic and social conditions in the developing countries of Africa.